

Absorbing Australian Culture Through the Exchange Program at RMIT International University in Vietnam

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This paper outlines a case study of four Vietnamese students who have just completed their exchange semester at RMIT University, Melbourne. Results indicate that the students appreciate multiple benefits brought by this experience, including a developing sense of language use, responsibility, dependence, self-awareness, integration, and problem-solving skills. But to them, the journey to Melbourne has especially opened their mind to the issues of cultural diversity and sensitivity, which they have never imagined before coming to Australia. The term “culture shock” might be best suited for them in the early days. What experiences have they gone through? What are the pros and cons of being an exchange student? How have they overcome their problems? How might these challenges contribute to their future plan? How do they conceptualize the term “global citizen”? What is their advice for those who want to go on an exchange program? Adopting an exploratory case study approach, this study will give a comprehensive picture on the experiences of these four Vietnamese students.

Key words: cultural awareness, international cooperation, international education, study abroad, student adjustment, student exchange program

Recent rapid socio-economic development has placed a huge demand on international cooperation for the Vietnamese institutions to ensure successful integration into the global world. One way for Vietnamese students to gain the experience necessary to operate in the new global environment is to study abroad. Study abroad is as a period of time where a student engages in an educational activity through an institution of learning or organization for schooling in a foreign country. Study abroad helps students to gain an appreciation for other cultures and the differences that they portray (Kauffmann et al., 1992). When the movement of studying abroad first broke out in the late 1990s, the UK, France and US were the top choices of Vietnamese students.

However, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Switzerland have also become familiar names on the list of destinations of Vietnamese students recently.

This paper was based on a case study of the personal experiences of four students at RMIT Vietnam who undertook one exchange semester at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT Melbourne) in Australia. It seeks to explore the benefits perceived by the students and how they conceptualize the term “global citizen” as a result of this event. At a time when Vietnamese universities open the door to integrate into the global academic world and many of them would like their students to gain more international exposure, this research aims to raise the awareness of

stakeholders so that they can make informed decisions upon what should be emphasized when designing exchange programs for local students.

Context of the Research

RMIT, the Australian-based institution, is the first fully foreign-owned university operating in Vietnam. It was officially opened in 2001 and now the university has two campuses at the two largest cities in Vietnam, one in Ho Chi Minh City and one in Hanoi with about 4,000 students. RMIT Vietnam offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs in various fields, including Business, Computing and IT, Communication, Engineering, Project Management and Design. At present, RMIT Vietnam students have the opportunity to study in Australia at RMIT University, Melbourne, on a Student Exchange Program. The program allows students to study for one or two semesters in Melbourne at the same tuition fee paid in Vietnam. Students applying to go on exchange to RMIT University Melbourne need to have achieved at least a credit average over the two most recent semesters of study to qualify for the Student Exchange program.

A review of current literature informs the researcher that the majority of studies in study abroad experiences have been conducted outside Vietnam. Despite the increasing popularity of exchange program in Vietnam, little research has been done into this area. This study is an attempt to fill the literature

gap and to raise awareness about organizing exchange programs for Vietnamese students.

Research Questions

In this study, the researcher investigated the following research question: How the exchange program at RMIT Melbourne affects the personal experiences of undergraduate college students at RMIT University Vietnam?

Overview of the Study

To answer the research question, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews on four students, two male and two female, from RMIT Vietnam who enrolled at RMIT Melbourne for the February intake in 2012 academic year. These undergraduate students were interviewed at the end of their four-month stay in Melbourne to complete their one semester exchange, also the last semester in their Bachelor of Commerce degree. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hour and its transcript and notes were then analysed for common themes.

A qualitative case study approach in the form of semi-structured interview was employed because this method can yield in-depth, detailed information. The interviews were semi-structured, in that the interviewer had a list of main topics to be included for discussion. This list was not comprehensive and the interviews could deviate from this whenever valuable information was to be gained. It is felt that this approach would at least ensure that all basic areas will be investigated, and that the interview would stay within the zone that is required by the interviewer. All interviews were carried out in the Vietnamese language, the first language of both the interviewer and interviewees and were audio-recorded. Semi-structured interview, a popular means of collecting qualitative data, was used since it provides "much greater flexibility than structured interview" (Burns 1999, p. 120).

Significance

This study may be useful to student affairs professionals, academic administrators and managers, particularly those who are involved in designing programs for study abroad and building up collaborative partnership with overseas institutions. In knowing potential areas of growth for students while on study abroad, those who design programs will be

able to incorporate opportunities in the study abroad experience that will foster positive growth in participating students. Staff with responsibility for pre-departure programming may also find results from this study useful. In assisting students to achieve a high level of enthusiasm for their upcoming experiences, and informing them about their opportunities for growth, the assurance of optimistic experiences while abroad could affect their experiences positively. The results of the study, therefore, are also of interest to students who plan to have an exchange program or to study abroad.

Background to the Study

Benefits of studying abroad

A review of previous studies has shown positive impacts on students' overall development during study abroad. This experience is usually well remembered by the participant as being the best experience of his or her student time (Stryker, 1997). Study abroad programs have been considered to have definite cultural, economic, and academic benefits. The focus on intellectual development and international perspective is often well recognized by many researchers. According to Kauffmann et al. (1992), studying abroad provides students a critical intellectual experience, both academically and non-academically. First, because students are exposed to various ways of classroom instruction and many new events of life outside classroom, they need to form their own perspectives regarding learning and living. In addition, adapting to life in a foreign country challenges students to be flexible and respond to different cultural mores. According to Gmelch (1997, p. 6) students' self-confidence could be enhanced while abroad. Second, as students immerse themselves in another country, their understanding of politics, economics, and culture increases (Kauffmann et al., 1992; Woody, 1995). This is especially true if they have taken courses about the country or culture, either at home or during their study. As Kauffmann et al. (1992) and Uehara (1986) put it, students who study abroad find they return home more keen on learning about other countries. The experience of living in a foreign country enhances their connection to the world community. This "connection" is increasingly important as modern media and technology make the world

more accessible. Global understanding also increases appreciation for the diversity of their own country.

Challenges arising from study abroad

Issues related to study abroad have also been well documented. Participation in study abroad is increasing, but many students do not make the most of the opportunity. Study abroad is criticized as only available to those students who are of the upper class, because of the financial implications to students (Stryker, 1997). Studying abroad is often much more expensive than a semester or year at the student's home institution. In addition, issues that threaten personal health and safety for students studying abroad may also limit participation. It is important that students follow the guidelines for safety abroad and use good judgment in protecting themselves (Scharman, 2002). Students may also need to obtain the proper inoculations as advised for their region of study (Scharman, 2002). Students must also execute good judgment and make healthy decisions while abroad to protect their health.

Findings

Analysis of the notes taken during the interviews and the transcripts together with the audio-recordings show there are seven major issues that the students were particularly concerned about. The researcher used thematic analysis to put what the students shared under appropriate categories, namely: language improvement, personal growth, cultural sensitivity, further study preparedness, global citizen conceptualization, academic apprehension and fear of discrimination. The students mentioned a number of benefits they gained during their stay along with the challenges they faced.

Language improvement

First of all, all the four students admitted their English language improved, especially in terms of listening and speaking. Because living in a student residence with few Vietnamese fellows, they had to use English almost all the time to communicate with their friends who came from various language backgrounds. They realized the term "Englishes" when listening and talking to those coming from India, Japan, Germany, or Italy whose pronunciations were quite distinct

from the English they had been taught. One remembered, "I have never imagined how difficult it was to listen to the kind of English that people from India or Japan speak. They are quite proficient users of vocabulary, and grammar but I couldn't really stand their accents". The demand on frequent use of English, both verbal for communication and written for assignments, made them aware of the common mistakes and how to avoid them. They also accelerated their natural acquisition of everyday English used for shopping, chatting and socializing. For instance, "I don't think that four months is long enough to significantly develop my English proficiency, but I can overcome the language anxiety that has been deep-rooted ever since I learnt English. I gain more confidence in communicating. I realize that in many occasions, fluency means much more than accuracy. I need to check grammar or spelling in written assignment but I can make mistakes in oral conversation and presentation without being afraid of receiving correction. I find living in the midst of the host culture makes language acquisition a lot easier. The constant practice allows me to gain confidence and competence in my language ability. It is much more personal and immediate than a language lab." When asked how they knew that their English language actually improved, four students said that they could now understand lectures in classroom without having to play the recordings again and they could comprehend the news on TV programs without much efforts. Two said that at least they were more confident in communicating with their friends in English and that their English proficiency IELTS tests would also be boosted up, particularly in the Listening and Speaking skills.

Personal growth

In terms of personal values, positive words such as self-dependence, self-reliance, and self-confidence characterize the four interviews. According to the participants, this was the very first time they had been away from home for study, away from the care and love of their family. Tough as it sounded when they first set foot on an overseas land, their homesickness made way for a new beginning, a new resolution they made to themselves. They realized that they had to be strong to stand on their own feet. Apart from preparing

for study, they had to do many things to settle in. They had to cook their own meal, wash their own clothes, tidy their own room, and do their own shopping. This routine really reminded them of the tasks that their mothers went on for nearly the whole life. Even two male students added that when they laid the fingers on housework, they realized how indifferent they were when at home. One student commented, "Through movies, I know that dependence is common in Western society but I have never imagined how it really is. When I come here, it dawns on me that I couldn't understand dependence in the real sense of the word because of my heavy reliance on my family". The four students then made it clear by giving some examples of how they gradually gained more confidence in communicating with other friends, and teachers. "By improving myself in daily tasks, I feel I am deeply involved and responsible for my own life, I know keeping relationship is a key factor in building good environment for both academic and non-academic life", one student described about how living away from home made her put more emphasis on enhancing interpersonal relationships.

Student revelations about their personal growth fitted in with previous research into study abroad experience. It is obvious that the decisions students make on their own increase their feeling of accomplishment and independence (Kauffmann et al., 1992; Martin, 1986). These changes in responsibility help young people develop a strong sense of self-awareness, less dependence on family and friends. Chickering & Reisser (1993) also explain that "a key developmental step for students is learning to function with relative self-sufficiency, to take responsibility for pursuing self-chosen goals, and to be less bound by others' opinions" (p. 47). They maintain, "students who take advantage of study abroad programs may blossom more rapidly" (p. 140). Students can triumph over their own perceptions of self-identity thanks to overseas experience.

Cultural sensitivity

Absorbing Australian culture is the most valued aspect of the experience. The students explained that in Vietnam, they lived in a quite homogeneous culture. Seldom did they interact with foreigners who came to live for a long time in Vietnam. They only encountered

tourists from other nations who visited Vietnam on a short stay or foreign professionals who came for work. But the picture was quite different in Melbourne. On the train, in the shop, in the street, in the restaurant and at the university, they met and talked to people coming from various cultural and religious backgrounds. Everywhere they came to, they were likely to meet another nation's citizen. One commented that her attitudes towards uniqueness had been shaped. "Cultural awareness is very significant, sometimes you can take part in the differences, but sometimes, it is better just to acknowledge that they are different from you and cultural shock exists, no matter how well you think you are prepared for". Following is a brief summary of the story during the interview with one female student that illustrates her notion on the term "culture shock":

A group of friends from China, India and Australia who she teamed up with in class invited her to a barbecue party in a park next to the Yarra River. They really enjoyed the outdoor food and drink on that early hot summer day. She thought there was no barrier between them as the conversation went well. However, when the party came to an end, students gathered within their own cultural groups and made their own plan for other late activities. No one would like her to join because she was the only Vietnamese there. The other three groups each had at least two members from their own country. In Vietnam, as she recalled, when the party ended, her friends would take into consideration how they would go home safely, who would accompany the female students or which road should they avoid going at night. But in Australia, she was totally left alone to make her way home. She would like to join her friends for other things they planned after the party but she was afraid if she asked, she would lose face. The concept of "keeping face" made her silent. She would like to ask for the best direction to come home but she feared she would be considered ignorant. She was extremely confused. However, as time passed by, she grew more aware of the contrast between the culture she was born in and the one she was being immersed in.

To one male student, culture learning is so exciting because it is like a spiritual adventure "Cultural sensitivity goes beyond its abstract notion to become a more concrete idea in my

mind. I think of India when noticing the curry smell, realize Italian presence when sighting a slice of pizza or remember Vietnam when looking at a Pho restaurant. It does not stop at acknowledging the differences; it requires me to fully appreciate the uniqueness in order to live in such a diversity environment. However, with one semester, I have just enough time to grasp the contrast. I am made aware that cultures differ significantly and it is important not to assume similarities. To me, the initial culture shock means feeling lonely, homesick, pressured, stressed, overwhelmed, fearful, angry, confused or judgmental.”

Further study preparedness

Another value brought by this exchange experience to the students is the need to further their study after finishing the undergraduate program at RMIT. Three out of four students explained that in Vietnam, it was only common for those working in the academic field to pursue higher education such as a Masters or Doctoral Degree. However, they found out that in Australia people from various backgrounds could enter postgraduate programs after several years of working experience. “Going to earn a higher degree is not something extremely out of the question for those who work full time. On the contrary, it is an advantage if we have working experience. I understand this because I see many students enrolling in postgraduate programs while working at the same time. However, experience in the field that I am determined to pursue will influence the success of my higher education. Therefore, I have decided to work for around two to five years before looking for a suitable Masters degree with an Australian institution. I think of Australia because it offers flexible courses. I mean I can choose to study with an Australian institution having joint programs in Vietnam or I can come back here [to Australia]”, one student elaborated on her willingness to seek a further degree. Though it was just their initial plans and those could be changed due to many other reasons by the time they finished their bachelor degree, the four students said they valued their Australian experience because it opened their mind to the idea of continuing study and perhaps life-long learning.

Global citizen conceptualization

Friedman (2007) argues that economic, technological and social changes are creating a worldwide level-playing field that require a totally new set of skills from future employees. To survive in this new order, Friedman advocates the need to change some goals in education and make students more “globally” aware. Therefore, the concept of “global citizen” has received much discussion. American President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, said: “We have learned to be citizens of the world, members of the human community” (1945). The idea that we are global citizens is not a new one. A global citizen can be defined as anyone who works to make the world a better place.

The four students shared their different opinions about the concept of “global citizen”. One said “I am not sure about what qualities a global citizen should have, but I am sure that in order to survive in a multicultural environment, a person needs to be well-equipped with adequate knowledge, skills and attitudes to cope with diversity and changes. They are general knowledge about culture, about issues the world is concerning, they also include effective communication skills and positive attitudes towards differences. I don’t think that these qualities are too demanding for a young citizen.” Another shared “The most important thing is that a global citizen must always have an open mind and open heart. An open mind enables him or her to see the complex issues confronting the world. An open heart allows him or her to share and sympathize. For instance, I think a “global citizen” needs to be fully aware of environmental issue and establish a stance so that he can participate in any youth forum or discussion about climate change”. In their opinion, a “global citizen” needs to travel a lot, learn more, read more, listen more and especially reflect more.

Academic apprehension

When asked about the difficulties they faced during their time in Australia, the four students appeared to be confused for a moment before elaborating on their responses. One student explained that the question the researcher asked “What are the main problems did you have during your stay in Australia?” was so general, adding that she would need clarity. Therefore, the questions were

rephrased with more detailed focus "Could you tell me what makes you feel afraid, worried, nervous or scared while you are doing your exchange semester in Australia in terms of your study, social relationship, financial matter and family communication?"

First, one of the four students hesitated "saying I have no problems is not true, but the issues do not prevent me from enjoying my exchange journey". While the benefits are more related to the non-academic side, the difficulties arise chiefly from academic matters. The students remembered that their first shock came not from culture, the thing that they prepared for in advance, but from their learning style. Three out of four did not participate in the Orientation week at RMIT, which aimed to give new students useful information about living in Melbourne and adopting a new student life. Therefore, they could not imagine the necessity of joining in sections specially prepared to assist students in academic achievement such as "Finding Library Information", "Study Resources" or "Managing Time". They strongly advised other students not to miss orientation sections because it provided the best chance to get to know a new learning environment and also to make friends. Though the lectures and seminars were organized in a similar way they were used to at RMIT Vietnam, what they found surprising were the involvement of students.

The students here were very open and clear in their expression. They did a lot of readings at home. All the four students admitted they could not keep up with their classmates for the first few weeks. They were slow because they could not anticipate the high level of autonomy required of students. Two of them were shocked to receive the poor results on the first assignments because their writings were criticized for the lack of supportive examples and critical arguments. However, gradually, the students joined in with their classmates and they helped them in reviewing the readings and doing assignments. They also knew how to make use of student services available to students such as student consultant and student tutor. They often consulted them for issues related to study. "Working with others is a must, especially if you would like to learn about them in the most effective way. I have the opportunity to team work with friends from China, New Zealand,

Canada and Bangladesh. I learn a little bit from each of them. Their knowledge and worldviews open my mind, my understanding and my appreciation of others. I learn not to have prejudices or false ideas about things and people. As student, you should also take full advantage of all the services available. I often make appointment to see my tutors so that they can explain the parts I cannot keep up with in class. I also ask some native English friends to proofread some of my writings or simply just give me their comments", one student said.

Apart from academic difficulty, the students mentioned other things that worried them such as balancing study and life, communicating with friends and maintaining relationships. However, they said these were common problems facing other students, including the locals. And they went on saying that they felt their academic difficulties made her well aware of their poor readiness for self-studying. They expressed their willingness to accommodate a new learning style to fit in with a new learning requirement.

Fear of discrimination

Second to academic worries, the four students told that they felt of sense of being discriminated against while being an international student in Australia. Two of them went on to express their feeling of inferiority complex, which arose from the readings of local newspapers reporting many cases of violence and insults for those considered not Australians or white origins, especially Asians and colored immigrants. This seems to be a paradox because discrimination and racism can be found in the most multicultural society like Australia. In a homogeneous country like Vietnam this is hardly heard of. One female student shared that she sometimes visited a couple of Vietnamese families migrating to Australia and also heard stories of discrimination. She observed that in most situations, people of non-Australian origins would love to integrate with local community but the more they tried, the more isolated they felt. They were barred by their language, cultural prejudices and even education. Finally, they were forced to return to their own groups. She explained that this was the reason why ethnic groups still live in a certain areas around Melbourne. She then drew a quite subjective conclusion that "I think it takes twice the effort for those not from the Western

background to become successful in Australia because they need another half endeavor to overcome the common fear of being discriminated at.

I mean equality does exist but there is still unfairness for certain groups of people". The concern for background discrimination is among the some problems that the students discussed during the interview. The fear of discrimination among international students, especially those from East and South East Asia, in fact, has been reported by Nolan (2005). For instance, according to a survey conducted on 200 international students at Monash university, a Melbourne-based institution with a high proportion of international students, nearly 60 per cent of female students reported that they experienced some form of discrimination, particularly at work and when finding accommodation (cited in Nolan 2005).

Discussion

Exchange program arrangement

Content analysis of students' responses to the interviews shows that the arrangement of the exchange program is one of the main concerns that influences students' decision on whether they would love to take one or not. The students said the time the program started mattered. At present, RMIT Vietnam had three semesters per year, beginning in February, June and October while RMIT Melbourne only has two semesters in February and July. As a result, students need to plan more than half year in advance if they want to apply for the exchange semester at RMIT Melbourne. In addition, the length of the exchange contributes to its success. The students agreed that longer stay would mean greater benefits but it would also require more careful plans and preparations. They claimed one semester was too short for them to join in other academic and cultural activities. No sooner had they familiarized with the weather, transport and pace of life in Melbourne than the time came for them to return home. Recalling other friends who also joined the exchange program, they added that they missed many things due to the very short time. "At home, we think four months would be long enough, but it takes us nearly one month to settle in, one month to make friends, and the other two months left is not sufficient for integrating and absorbing the local culture, let

alone keeping up with study. That is why I think what I really know now about Melbourne, RMIT and even my study is just the tip of the iceberg". It is suggested that the exchange program should emphasize on more non-academic activities with longer time frames for students to fully immerse themselves in the host culture.

More experiences sharing on pre-departure orientation

The students were moderately satisfied with the program organization but they put more emphasis on the "extracurricular" skills they gained. Appreciations of non-academic features are evident in the interviews. Personal development and cultural sensitivity are ranked highly. It is expected that orientation briefing before coming to Australia must be done with more focus on personal stories about successful adaptations, even failures or problems in studying and living in a new environment. Formal induction and introduction about Australian values, norms are necessary but students will be more interested in listening to real personal narratives from their classmates. Stories may also consist of information about issues related to bi-sexuality or homosexuality, racism and sexism which appear rather open and generally discussed in Australian society but still rather restricted or unheard of in Vietnamese culture.

If possible, networking activities with other students and those having prior Australian living experiences could be arranged frequently for students at RMIT so that students interested in the exchange program have plenty of opportunities to seek advice about their study abroad arrangements. Online contact also proves positive options in keeping in touch with students intent on joining the exchange program.

Conclusion

In brief, this study examined the impacts of study abroad experiences on student personal development. By living with other students in student accommodation, the students gained the skills that would not be learned staying in comfortable environments at home. In this article, the discussion focused on seven major areas that were affected by studying abroad: language improvement, personal growth, cultural sensitivity, further study preparedness, global citizen

conceptualization, academic challenges and fear of discrimination. Although these aspects appear to be achievements for personal benefit, they are also knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs desired of a global citizen. While studying a course is usually the main purpose of an exchange program, learning another culture must not be under-evaluated. The significance of living in another cultural setting is an experience of a lifetime. The mixing of cultures and backgrounds provides young people with an unforgettable awareness and lifelong appreciation of other's nation. It is worth mentioning that much of the learning and acquisition that affected the students during their study abroad occurred in social settings as lived experiences, rather than via formal instruction in schools. It is, therefore, important to construct study abroad curriculum not only in the contexts of schools, but also in various other local environments, such as the home, community, region, religious beliefs, attitudes, and morals, which comprise a worldview that fundamentally facilitates the international youth exchange students' learning environments through various cross-cultural experiences in the host communities. The findings of this study confirm what other researchers have explored about the positive effects of studying abroad (Gmelch 1997; Kauffmann et al. 1992; Uehara 1986; Woody 1995).

These interviews, personal as they are, reveal the personal growth as well as cultural enhancement of the students. The overseas trip means much more than mere academic study. It is, in fact, a great opportunity to learn more about oneself, to join, to involve, to share, to try, to grow, to experience and to appreciate others. It is regarded as a life-changing adventure. The multicultural diversity of Melbourne is the most appealing feature that made her trip worthwhile. It opened their mind to several questions that they wished to learn more about. Though challenges do exist, they are not the major obstacles that prevent the students from enjoying life and study. "Global citizens" in their mind are those who have knowledge, skills, attitudes and belief that can adapt themselves well in a multi-cultural environment. They can be students, professionals or even immigrants who are studying, travelling, working or seeking family union. The high level of satisfaction opens

new prospects for more educational cooperation that offers exchange opportunities for Vietnamese students. Preparation is, as a result, a key element in getting satisfaction out of the study abroad programme. However, the study is limited in examining experiences arising from only four students. Cultural and learning adjustment is a long process, which requires deeper investigation on a larger sample. More data is needed for future research in study abroad experiences with Vietnamese students. Moreover, the study also raises the importance of looking into the recent experiences of those coming back to their institution and home country after a period of exposure to foreign environment.

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